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ABSTRACT

This document is a report of a panel discussion on literacy conducted at an adult education conference in Quebec (Canada). Panelists included Leona Grise, Brenda Lee, and Nicole Snaauw; Ann M. Gauvin was the moderator. The discussion centered on student recruitment, the dropout factor, and alternate methods of learning for individuals lacking sufficient basic skills. Points made include the following: (1) persons must attain a certain social status to want to improve their circumstances and to learn more; (2) social discrimination is a factor in student recruitment; and (3) education must be intertwined with the lives and social experiences of people. Panelists also noted that in order to learn how to prevent students from dropping out of literacy programs, it is necessary to understand why they are there. Some of their motivations for learning are escape from boredom, professional advancement, external expectations, and personal growth--and perhaps state financing of social assistance programs. A definition of literacy is suggested, and ideas for making literacy education more pleasant--such as by including literature and poetry--are presented. (8 references) (KC)

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A A A C E CONFERENCE

Wednesday, October 16, 1991

Literacy: Are We On The Right Track?

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Moderator: ***Ann M. Gauvin***

Panelists: ***Leona Grisé***
Brenda Lee
Nicole Snaauw

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Good Afternoon Everyone:

My name is Ann Gauvin and I'm the Provincial Coordinator for the Quebec Literacy Working Group, which is a provincial support group for school board personnel and volunteer groups involved in adult literacy within the English sector here in the Province of Quebec.

Today I will act as the moderator for this session entitled "Literacy - Are We On The Right Track?". Jonathan Kozol in his book Illiterate America states that "the measure of success of literacy should be the number of adults who become involved in learning and the number of successful readers who have won the tools by which they can alter the condition of their lives".

With our distinguished panelists, we hope to initiate some discussion on elements of the illiteracy problem:

- *that of recruitment and all its elements*
- *that of the drop-out factor*
- *and finally, alternate methods of learning for individuals lacking sufficient basic skills.*

Following the presentations, we will open up the session for input and discussion by all participants. It is not our intent this afternoon to answer the question definitively "Are We On The Right Track?", but rather to provide some food for thought for further discussion during and after this Conference.

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Those who support the fight against illiteracy are quick to cite figures to show the magnitude of the problem. They may also draw attention to the distressing psychological and social conditions of the victims of illiteracy and then again may deplore the huge economic and social cost of widespread illiteracy. Statistics are overwhelming concerning the needs and yet the people presumed to have this imperative and urgent need are simply not showing up at our programs.

To open this discussion on recruitment I'm delighted to introduce NICOLE SNAAUW, a Consultant in Adult Education since 1986 with Western Quebec Regional School Board in Aylmer.

RECRUITMENT

Recruitment. The very nature of the word with its barely hidden military imagery, sets the tone of our work. The literacy "campaign" further emphasizes the same attitude. It is easy to fall into the sense of urgency that prevails in a military operation where numbers count and certain goals (read targets) must be reached. Do we really want a war mentality?

We are in the business of literacy. We have read the statistics and seen people struggling with poor literacy skills. It is hard to imagine what our lives would be like if we could not read or write well or, how we would value ourselves. In the field of education, letters after your name denoting the number of university degrees you hold is very powerful. But does that widen the comprehension gap between us and our clients?

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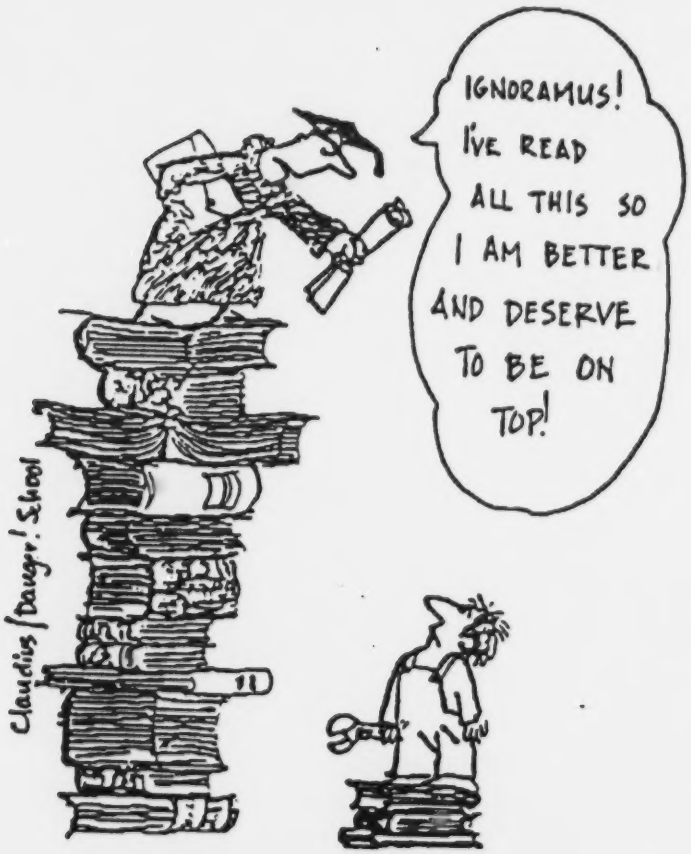
Certainly, literacy workers in the developing world think so, as this sketch illustrates.



Statistics Canada in its landmark survey of 1990, spelled out in detail literacy levels and numbers of population.[1] Most of us were startled and then energized in our work when we read of 38% of Canadians having some degree of difficulty with literacy. And yet, it is only in the cities with the large influx of immigrants that services are really being strained by heavy enrolment.

In rural areas, where we are dealing more with mother tongue literacy, the situation is different. It is a slow, difficult process building a literacy program. It has taken active and creative community sensitization projects to make people

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aware that such a problem exists and that it is possible to have another opportunity to develop or improve basic academic skills. To this end, the monies spent on publicity from Federal-Provincial funding have helped. More people are aware of the issue and discussing it. This is particularly important when we are developing partnerships with personnel in three areas: the school system, the health care system, and the income support system.

It is in the school system that literacy is supposed to happen and for most children it does. For too many others, school becomes a place of frustration. Often these children have parents who have also had difficulty in schools and yet our teachers and administrators are only slowly becoming aware of the importance of adult illiteracy and its link to their work with children. The "Parents-as-Partners-as-Learners Project" has pointed this out and suggested an avenue for cooperation.[2] Illiterate adults when they become parents and have to send their children to the school where they themselves failed, are in a very sensitive situation. They need support and encouragement to learn how to help their children. Most parents want their children to do better than they did.

The professionals in the health field also need to learn more about literacy. First of all, so they can make sure patients understand directions. Cecilia Doal et al has written a very helpful book on this subject.[3] But nurses and doctors also need to understand illiteracy in its wider context. In a survey of illiterate adults in two rural areas of Quebec, 38% of respondents identified health and social problems as the reasons for their lack of literacy skills.[4] Poor attendance at school resulting from health and social problems at home not only impedes learning at school but increases stress and makes it hard to study.

The third partnership is with the income support system. While it is certainly true that there are people with literacy problems that are successful in business, many more of them end up across the desk from an agent discussing their finances. The additional problem of not being able to read the forms and the implications for that, are only beginning to be understood. If the agent can have a positive impact i.e. acceptance of the person's situation, and encouragement to take training, it makes it easier for the client to consider re-entering school. If the agent is negative and critical, it is one more push away from learning for the client.

As the general sensitization of the community continues, attitudes towards people with literacy problems are improving. What, then, of the people themselves? Why is it so difficult for them to be recruited?

We are still dealing with a very complex situation. Not all people with literacy problems are living the same experience. Hautecoeur [5] in his 1990 discussion of the literacy issue, describes the situation this way:

> *"Although we can draw a profile for certain groups within the illiterate population, most do not match any specific profile. The further we move from the "hard core" of illiteracy, or from radical exclusion, the harder it becomes to recognize illiterates. While social differences are indeed perceived as inequalities, they are not attributed to "illiteracy". People must be educated or have climbed the socioprofessional ladder to recognize the value of this type of social advancement before they can see themselves as illiterate or wish to improve their situation. They must know or believe that learning to write will change their lives and enable them to open the door to a new adventure in learning."*

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In our work we frequently meet people who have developed a life style where they can pretend they do not feel their lack of literacy skills. There is always a relative or friend who can help with documents, or the local scribe who will fill out a form. News and entertainment come via the television. Information on health, nutrition and parenting is passed on in families but is heavily influenced by slick advertising. Consumer reports are not accessible to this population. There has to be a precipitating event or problem to solve that makes a person finally let down the defensive barriers and look at the reality of the situation. The event may be something as simple as having to hide ones lack of skills once too often or the government agent making an offer which cannot be refused. Becoming a parent of school age children re-awakens all the nightmares of that experience. It creates a conflict between the desire to be able to help the children do better than their parent(s) and the fear of exposing themselves to the professionals. What ever the perceived crisis, the illiterate person needs first of all, support and acceptance, then the offer of the challenge to take another chance on education. This is such a sensitive time that professionals intervening at this point need the kind of skills described in Jacquelyn Small's book "Becoming Naturally Therapeutic".[8]

We all play a part in the development of literacy programs and the attitude of clients towards them. The touchy subjects of social acceptance has to be addressed.

Paolo Freire's [6] work in Brazil has much to contribute to this area. Nina Wallerstein [7] describes it thus:

> *"Freire's central premise is that education is not neutral; whether it occurs in a classroom or in a community setting, the interaction of teacher and student does not take place in a vacuum. People bring with them their cultural expectations, their experiences of social discrimination and life pressures, and their strengths in surviving. Education starts from the experiences of people, and either reinforces or challenges the existing social forces that keep them passive."*

We, too, have questions of social discrimination and cultural expectations to deal within our society. Can we turn our attention from numbers to attitudes? The big challenge is how can we genuinely value and accept people where they are now, and at the same time invite and challenge them to continue to learn.

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Moderator:

It is essential to adapt services to multiple populations and contexts, to different expectations and needs as well as to other social problems if we are to meet the needs of those who enter our programs. Here in Quebec, the Public Instruction Act makes literacy accessible to all in principle but by integrating it with our school system it risks keeping away most people and those of us who work with school boards are very aware of this problem. The door is open but few enter willingly. Those who permit themselves to do so, do not stay very long, and among those who stay, how many want to and can go on?

What is wrong here? To discuss the issue and concerns in this area with us is LEONA GRISÉ, an Androgogical Consultant with the Lakeshore/Baldwin-Cartier School Board in Pointe-Claire. Leona has been involved in literacy work for over 12 years and has been instrumental in initiating new approaches into her literacy programs. Recently it was Memory Improvement through Memory Pegs.

DROP-OUTS

An evaluation of the effectiveness of literacy programs must address the situation of the drop-out factor:

- ***Why do students drop out before the completion of a session or established goals?***
- ***Why are there many absences?***
- ***Why are there so many learners who are latecomers?***

These are concerns which must be addressed in realistic and honest terms.

Should program planners first do an analysis of motivational orientations? Wouldn't a knowledge of why students come to class - not just accepting the general statement of wanting to learn to read and write, but rather the specific reason for adult participation - provide a focus for retention of these students.

The knowledge and awareness of adult motivational orientations can provide a valuable resource for diagnosing learning needs and designing appropriate educational activities.

Therefore, in the interviewing and assessment of the students are we determining if their reason for being there is:

1. *Escape/Stimulation - from routine, boring, frustrating situations.*
2. *Professional advancement - to get a job; improve position in work world; increase competence on job.*
3. *External expectations - pressure by work, family, friends, the community itself.*
4. *Personal Growth - improve self; overcome frustration of day to day living; to become more effective citizens, to meet other individuals.*

Or is the underlying motivation the fact that the student is being financed by social assistance programs to attend classes and therefore there is no true commitment to learning.

Once the reasons are determined then strategies can be recommended to maintain the motivations.

Are we aware of the student's actual perception of education?

Are students participating in defining their goals and planning the program? They need to be helped to take charge of their own learning. New and effective habits need to be created among the adult population returning to school.

Are we instilling in the student the realization that the goal of literacy is not just acquiring the ability to read and write but using that ability for pleasure, for safety, and for the acquisition of knowledge? Students should be learning content but they also should be learning life skills.

Are we giving our consideration to work-related literacy programmes? Would the drop-out factor decrease by combining literacy instruction with training in sewing, child care, home gardening and other skills valued by the participants? In other words are we providing a full range of learning options, structures and components? Is there a variety of learning situations in various locations, with flexible scheduling?

Provided facilities must be in an adult environment. Expecting adult students to function effectively in areas designed for children is not acceptable. These humiliated adults will leave. We mustn't forget that the promotion of literacy programme is mostly by word of mouth. Unprofessional facilities will receive much bad publicity which we can ill afford!

Are we providing support services? Many students are struggling to meet basic survival needs. Are the students counselled on the local social service agencies and what they can offer? Are we liaising with community to ensure that basic education needs of the area are met? Many students require social assistance in the form of income support; transportation allowances; child care.

Child care is a major concern. A woman's work day usually begins before dawn and ends long after sunset. How is it possible for these women to attend literacy classes regularly? While in class, who will care for their children? The provision of on-site day care may do much to prompt enrolment and guarantee participation.

What is being done to gain support for motivated learners not only from their families but also from employers? The work place must become involved and show support by allowing learners to leave earlier in order to get to class or to rearrange schedules to allow students to attend necessary courses.

How effective are the current social assistance programs? Are they really relating to the needs of the learners? Despite Bill C21, enacted in April 1991, clientele is still being lost because of the restriction attached. There is a 30 hour a week minimum attendance and the programme must run for a full year. How realistic is this for students who can only attend between 6-9 hours a week because of all their other responsibilities? What happens to the students who have seasonal employment? There is not time for classes when the hunting or fishing season begins.

Poverty plays a major role in the drop-out rate. Transportation costs can be inhibitive. Would subsidized bus passes be a viable solution? How are we addressing the situation which exists in the rural area? What assistance is provided for students who, in order to attend literacy classes, must travel great distances, meet the challenge of weather conditions, and allow for the hours of travel time?

Many literacy students lack self-esteem and self-confidence and are not articulate in expressing their concerns. They may not like the class, or the teaching style; they may feel they just don't fit in, especially if there is a mix of first and second language learners; they may feel they are not making any progress. Rather than risk speaking out about their problems and being rejected, they just drop out. Do we have adequate staff to follow up on student drop-out and absenteeism? Is the staff given adequate time to provide the required support?

Literacy opens doors to jobs, to training programs and to membership in community. If we are on the right track, we as providers of literacy programs, will make certain that adult literacy students will not walk through these open doors and close them behind them.

Moderator:

Finding great things in this world is not so much where we stand as in what directions we are moving.

We must sail sometimes with the wine and sometimes against it - but we must sail and not drift, nor be an anchor.

I believe that literacy workers are in fact today putting into practice what is suggested in the above quotation from Oliver Wendall Holmes. Continuing our thought-process on Literacy - Are We On The Right Track?", I would like to introduce BRENDA LEE, a consultant in Adult Education with the South Shore Regional School Board in St. Lambert, Québec.

Brenda has been helping people with literacy since she was a child, being an avid reader herself but was startled in her advancing years to find herself being treated as some kind of a specialist on the subject.

I'm sure that you will agree with me that she does have much expertise to share with us.

AN ALTERNATE VIEW

Some of us have been working in the field of literacy for over a decade now. We have seen programs grow from haphazard semi-volunteer efforts to semi-institutionalized entities. That is, while funding is not guaranteed and the availability of dedicated space and resource is uneven, there is official recognition that we do have a serious problem of inadequate literacy in this country which is seriously prejudicing our self reliance and competitive position in the world and that someone should be doing something about it. New partners are getting involved and new avenues are being explored. We are beginning to address the questions of standards evaluation and effectiveness, while continuing to struggle with the continuing problems of accessibility, recruiting, program development and delivery.

Poised as we are, on the brink of a new thrust forward, with the addition of new players and resources to our cause, it seems appropriate to take a breath for reflection. We need to reflect on our past, our accomplishments and failures, what we have learned from our history. Then we can more adequately share our experience with newcomers and inform our future activities to gain the maximum benefit from scarce resources, sharing the tasks appropriately and avoiding wasteful overlapping.

Perhaps it is pertinent, also, to re-examine our purpose. Could it be defined more broadly? Or with more precision? The more we are clear, the more we can focus on our objectives, attain them, and evaluate our degree of achievement, fine tuning for the next step. This would also suggest other partners we could approach.

It is to stimulate this kind of thought that we raise this, by no means exhaustive, list of questions.

DEFINITION OF LITERACY

Would it be helpful to be more explicit in our definition of literacy? When we speak of basic literacy as reading, writing and, perhaps, the basic arithmetical operations, this is what we see classroom teachers and volunteers working on.

Shouldn't we see more emphasis in our literacy classes on the ability to apply critical thinking, draw inferences, comprehend, and manipulate acquired information and ideas? Should this not apply to oral material as well as broadcast and print material? We often hear lip service to the notion that "reading is about understanding and writing is about thinking", but how often do we see thinking skills taught in class? Would a literacy teacher ever think of using any Edward de Bono lateral thinking ideas in the class, for example?

Stress is a major barrier against learning for literacy students. Have we seen any stress management techniques taught in class? Any music or drama? Information is now available about the effectiveness of play in learning, about memory theory, and so on. Are traditionally educated teachers aware of these techniques? Do they use them?

TEACHING METHODS AND TEACHER TRAINING

I have never dropped into a literacy class and seen the teacher doing anything but lecturing students while using the blackboard, or supervising them to fill out blanks in a workbook. On the first day of class or at a party, we might see a word game. Students have also been accompanied to a movie or a book sale. Perhaps there are more exciting and engaging things going on in these classrooms, but I have never seen them.

Sometimes I receive a request of money for a Christmas party, and, not having such funds available, make a donation from my own pocket which supplements other donations from teachers and students. Yet, when I suggest that a student group be created during class time so that students can learn how to function in a meeting, make an agenda, take minutes, and so on, so that they undertake projects to raise their own funds, learn how to advertise, create a product or service, bill, and do a little simple bookkeeping and banking, my request falls on deaf ears.

Never do I see role playing or communication exercises to enhance the students self expression or conflict management ability. By defining literacy as reading, writing and math, are we forgetting the oral component which is the basis of it all. This is not to accuse the teacher, but simply to point out how limiting our customary frame for literacy is.

Stan Jones of Carleton University describes how researchers find important the distinction between "reading to learn" and "reading to do," and of the lack of transferability between the two. Since most of that taught in schools is the former and most of that used in life is the latter, could this lack of awareness by teachers and lack of relevance to students have anything to do with the drop out rate?

The September issue of Literacy across the Curriculum discusses the relationship between literacy and electronic media and how it can be used to extend rather than replace other forms of literacy. The research of Jon Baggaley of Concordia University suggests undereducated, functionally illiterate adults are not more able to gain benefit from films than from print. Should understanding media critically be taught in the classroom? Is it a part of being literate?

What about other everyday skills and knowledge that might be needed by someone who has never read a sign, a government pamphlet, a manual, a newspaper? Teachers do incorporate a lot of these survival skills, such as reading a want ad, signs, consumer activities and so on.

In general, however, it seems that the attitude by the system toward the weak reader is to learn to read first, then learn other things. Would it help the literacy student, for example, if there was a separate class set up for cooking? Or photography? Or first aid? Or home repairs? The current guidelines of the Ministry of Education, I believe, are flexible enough to incorporate much more into the literacy curriculum as life skills which would provide corollary reinforcement to "reading and writing as understanding and thinking".

Would this attract and retain students better?

How about effective learning? What about reading for pleasure? Some of these students have difficult lives. More than once I have heard complaints about the "death and disaster" reading material found, not only in literacy, but in literature classes. Do we ever read to students? Adventure stories? Mysteries? Poetry? Do we teach them to write love letters or only deposit slips? It is up to the students to choose what to learn, but they have no idea of the possibilities. Our job is to open the door to the treasure chest and show them the glories within. That's what we mean by motivation.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Practical day to day survival is a problem for many students. Those lucky enough to have a job often work under the poorest of conditions with overnight shift work, tenuous status, long hours, and so on.

Employment training is not available to people with less than Secondary III, and particularly not to people who do not read well or need a little more time to learn in spite of some sort of Secondary III or even V in special education or short vocational. These people are not slow enough for a sheltered workshop, but can't keep up with a regular job training program. Some may be quite bright and exceptionally able in their manual dexterity, vision spacial acuity and social skills, but, due to some form of dyslexia, unable to complete a program. Could these people benefit by some sort of apprenticeship or mentored training? This should be done by trained staff and not by some poor peon in the workforce who finds him or herself unwillingly drafted into the additional role of teacher, for

which he is totally untrained, unprepared, and unsuited by temperament and skill.

Most critical is the need for adequate income support while these people are being trained. Essential is the availability of a variety of programs suited to their skill level. Underlying all this, of course, is a vibrant economy which would include elements which could absorb people into the labour force. This would take people off of social assistance and share the tax burden among more, and it would contribute to their self esteem and acceptability into a normal family life.

Companies can be approached to provide training for their workers to avoid lay offs due to changes in technology of upgrading through the FME program (customized training in the workplace). It is obvious, however, that companies are interested in short term projects narrowly focused on job skills such as reading work orders, company manuals, safety instructions, and filling out reports, time sheets and so on. This type of learning, as noted in the experience of Hélène Blais at Weston Bakery in Longueuil, is not transferable to other kinds of reading. Workers had improved their confidence in their ability to learn to such an extend, however, that they continued their learning by attending regular literacy classes given by Chambly School Board. The need to retain a job is a great motivator. Demonstrated success helps too. What does this mean? Small bites and frequent rewards. Especially at the beginning. Also practical, functional and visible results must be experienced.

LEARNING MATERIALS AND DELIVERY SYSTEMS

The irregular and uncertain schedule of work, when available, contributes to the difficulty students have attending class even when highly motivated. When they return, what they learned has often been lost, contributing to their sense of failure and frustration.

This is not exceptional, but a normal fact of life. Could we not do something to help these people retain what they learned in these interim periods? If we made learning packages accompanied by audio-tape would it not help them not only later, but also during the short learning periods to experience more repetition for homework and boost their acquisition levels while enroled. These would also be helpful for people who, due to lack of transportation, health or family constraints are not able to attend class at all.

Audio tapes also can boost the acquisition of reading skills by flooding the student with subject matter, information as discovery by Thomas Sticht. Using these methods in his research project on the U.S. Army in the 1960's Dr. Sticht found he was able to improve by two grade levels the reading skills of 100% of the candidates in a very limited period. Could this be something we might produce with our federal grants? Audio-tapes dense with content accompanied by written material and workbooks at carefully graded reading levels on practical subjects could be used anonymously alone or with tutor support until the need and courage arrived to enter a classroom situation.

When people think of audio-visual aids to learning they often think of video tapes, computer programs, and cable T.V. All of these things are costly and require some technical skill and the ability to be at a certain place at a certain time. Would it not be more effective to reach large numbers of people, whatever their financial means, through audio-tapes supported by workbooks, seminar sessions, a tutor or a teacher available by phone, and flexible sessions? Funding sources must be supple enough to allow for creative solutions.

People are insatiable learners, no matter what their mental and physical ability. I believe that the need to learn is as strong as the hunger for food and drink. If, in spite of all our efforts, we are not attracting more than 2% of our target group, we must ask ourselves, and them, why. It is disappointing to learn that in Great Britain with its central administration of education, collaboration of the BBC and volunteer groups, as well as large sums of money poured into their literacy project, which legitimized, popularized and publicized their programs and the acceptability of learning to read, the same percentage of adults are reached. This suggests that we can abandon our fantasies that more resources alone are the solution.

We need to find out what people are doing, where they are going and how they are trying to fulfill their need to learn. Will we find them at the museums, in the bowling alleys, at the shopping centres, in the churches? Do they use video games, comic books, television? Can we devise new informal methods that would attract broad numbers? How about street theatre, story time in the park, scribes on the street corner, recruitment in restaurants and bars, book sharing and trading, books identified by reading level in libraries? These are only a few

questions and ideas that I hope will be of some help in exploring new or additional strategies to try and partnerships to build, as we work together to help every Canadian to attain adequate literacy, the key to full citizenship and a satisfying personal life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

SUMMATION:

Illiteracy is more than an educational problem, it is a social, economic and political issue as we have seen in the presentations and discussions this afternoon.

Each of us must continue to meet the training, support and advocacy needs of the adults lacking basis skills.

We must conduct activities that promote change in the systems and institutions that cause and perpetuate illiteracy and pursue an agenda that challenges the educational, social, political and economic barriers to literacy development.

My thanks to each of the panelists for thought-provoking presentations and to the participants for your active voices in our discussions.

Literacy "Are We On The Right Track?", each of us will have to answer that question for ourselves.

Thank-you.

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